

Reflections from the Holy Land Is there any humanity left?

The past few months have been very difficult on many fronts including the never-ending war in Gaza already over 21 months old; a nerve wrecking twelve-day war with Iran; and excessive violence, destruction, and travel restrictions on the West Bank. The most troubling part is that with all the wars, we seem more distant from peace as all parties are claiming victory, and the talk continues to be about more destruction, revenge, and killing rather than reconciliation and a genuine desire to deal with the core issues and reach the ultimate peace the region so desperately needs.

As Gaza enters its 21st month of war, the death toll exceeded 57,000 over 60% of whom are women, elderly, and children with the number of injuries exceeding 134,000. With no infrastructure remaining including the destruction of 92% of all housing units, over two million people are left to live on the streets without the basic necessities subjected to all kinds of inhuman treatment running for their lives from one safe zone to the next, subjecting themselves to firing zones when they go to seek food through the only means of delivery available through the "Gaza Humanitarian Foundation" where dignity and safety are compromised while



seeking food. It is reported that over 600 people to date have been killed as they lined up to seek food through this mechanism. Where else in the world would you find a whole population denied food, water, medicine, education, and basic infrastructure for so long in front of a deaf and silent world that stands idly! What will the history books write about what is happening in Gaza today?

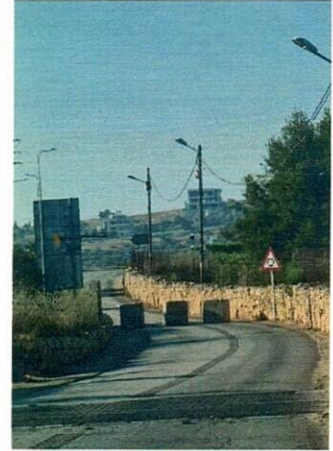


As for the war with Iran that lasted twelve days, clearly there are no winners in this war and the conflict is not resolved by any means. Many feel the next round will eventually come sooner or later. During those 12 days, we had many sleepless nights marked by the sounds of sirens, distant



explosions and rushing to shelters. The level of destruction in Israel has been unprecedented compared to all its previous wars with rockets hitting army bases, power plants, oil refinery, hospitals, research centers and universities among others. Israeli media reported damages to 2,305 homes in 240 buildings leaving more than 13,000 displaced. This does not count the economic costs of the war which are staggering. Had all the money spent on wars been devoted to economic development and building communities, our region would truly be an oasis of peace by now!

The West Bank was quietly turned into large unsafe prisons during the Gaza and Iran wars. Settler violence against innocent Palestinians through indiscriminate attacks, burning homes, cars, trees, and cutting off roads while the government engages in further land grabs and expanding and initiating new settlements. All of this while actively and systematically destroying refugee camps and forcing people to move out. So far, it is reported that over 70,000 people have been forcefully displaced, for many of them for the third or fourth time in a lifetime. All of this is taking place while the Israeli government continues its policy to strangle the Palestinian Authority financially almost causing its near collapse. The PA already cannot pay salaries, and unemployment is through the roof. The more recent trend of Israeli banks refusing to accept cash from Palestinian banks is causing an unprecedented crisis with shortages starting to show, most notably in the supply of fuel which is in shortage causing long lines and rationing at the few gas stations that continue to have a supply. Chaos on the West Bank is just around the corner.



Despite a relatively bleak picture, what we have learned is that as people of strong faith and deep hope, we always find ways to cope and continue to provide services to those entrusted to us. The school year closed on time for our 20,000 students with many joyous graduations taking place in late Spring. Most parishes are now engaged in summer camp activities with around 6,000 youth participating. Pastoral activities never stopped while being expanded in most areas, and priests and nuns are working beyond their means to be of support. Our social services department is witnessing the largest increase in applications for support in our history.



This is mainly due to the high unemployment as a result of the wars and the policies of the government of Israel. Despite this increase and given the incredible generosity of our many donors from around the world, we are able to support thousands of beneficiaries with medical support, tuition aid, social assistance and job creation and empowerment programs.



It is very sad to witness an almost total breakdown of law and order around the world with little or no respect for international norms, treaties, humanitarian laws and conventions and respect for human dignity. It is very sad to see the double standards applied depending on race, color, and ethnicity, and the cruelty with which Palestinians are dehumanized with calls for starvation and mass transfer being regularized! Injustices around the world will eventually be addressed and historic wrongs will be corrected. Let us pray and hope this will be the case and our region will witness better days for all its people, whether Jewish, Moslem, or Christian; Israeli or Palestinian. Please keep praying!

*Sami El-Yousef
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